

Democrats Fiddle as Fires Burn

Only the Working Class Can Save Los Angeles

Los Angeles going up in flames is the very image of where the ruling class is taking the country as a whole. In a highly segregated city marked by a vast gulf between rich and poor, the conditions of life for the black, brown and immigrant masses of South L.A. and Pico Union are worlds apart from those in the Palisades, one of the most affluent areas in the U.S. If the neglect of the capitalist rulers can turn the Palisades “dream neighborhood” into smoldering ruins, where does that leave the working class and poor in L.A. and beyond?

This crisis is emblematic of an empire in decline. Critical infrastructure has been rotting for decades. The power lines, faulty and antiquated, are fire starters. Water reservoirs are closed indefinitely for repair, and hydrants run dry. Capitalist politicians strip funds from understaffed and under-resourced fire departments, further sabotaging the most basic lines of defense against disaster. The Democratic Party of L.A. mayor Karen Bass and California governor Gavin Newsom has run the city for decades on behalf of the bosses and real estate barons, presiding over deindustrialization and skyrocketing housing costs.

Bass and Newsom did precious little to prepare for the well-known threat of wildfires and to contain their spread once ignited. In response to the Democrats’ glaring incompetence, Trump and the Republicans jumped at the chance to posture as potential saviors. But just look at Republican-run North Carolina, where over one hundred were killed and tens of thousands displaced in floods last year and many still await relief. Clearly, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have any answers.

Those who call the shots in this country have increasingly amassed wealth through wild speculation; they are social parasites who are not about to spend the sums needed to restore the city’s infrastructure and industry because that is not how they make their money. The only way to save L.A. is for the working class to take control of the situation before they get it next!

The wildfires were entirely predictable. The conditions of dry land, brush and high Santa Ana winds are regular features of the ecology of the Santa Monica mountains—conditions exacerbated by climate change. Devastating fires, which can be mitigated but not eliminated, have swept through this land ever since homes were first built on it over a hundred years ago. Yet the number and size of homes has only increased, as has the frequency of fires. The wealthy take the risk when they build multimillion-dollar mansions, and real estate developers disregard the threat in the interests of huge profits. But this time, the fires spread out of control, affecting much broader swathes of the city. Legions of immigrant cleaners, nannies and gardeners who worked in the Palisades are now out of their jobs, and the historically black working-class part of Altadena has been wiped out.

With the median cost of a home topping \$1 million and a burgeoning homeless population, L.A. is already one of the least affordable urban centers in the U.S., and the fires will only make things a lot worse in every corner of the city. Landlords are raising rents for the displaced amid a shortage of available apartments. The property developers and real estate sharks are salivating at the prospect of rebuilding the Palisades. The insurance crooks will continue to jack up rates of those policies they do not drop.

In the face of this crisis, Democratic Party politicians and liberal elements preach that “we’re in this together.” But we are not. The working class should not pay to rebuild L.A. for the rich. For many workers in this vast metropolis who don’t live or work in the fire zone, it’s not entirely clear how this crisis impacts them. While the rich in the Palisades and Malibu will be fine, the working class and poor throughout the city will be left holding the bag.

What is urgently needed are workers committees to ensure that the recovery and rebuilding effort proceeds in a progressive manner—that is, protects working people’s health, safety and livelihoods, addresses their needs and

halts the social decay. The working class must seize vacant housing and luxury buildings for the newly homeless as well as the legions of existing homeless in L.A.! Quality, integrated housing must be built for all! Expropriate the Palisades and Malibu and use the land for the benefit of all working people!

Working people will be made to shoulder the cost of recovery in every respect as long as the bosses and their politicians get their way. To prevent that from happening and a repeat of this crisis, the working class must step forward in its own name to defend its interests against both wings of the ruling class—the hated liberal Democrats and the right-wing Trump Republicans alike. There must be a head-on confrontation with the class enemy and its political representatives to rip from their hands the urgently needed resources to rebuild. The city's firefighters, Department of Water & Power workers, transit workers, truckers, laborers and longshore workers all have crucial roles to play. But standing in the way are the trade-union leaders, who have spent all the unions' money and efforts mobilizing behind the same liberal Dems who have brought the city to the brink of ruin.

Take the head of the United Firefighters union, Freddy Escobar, who tearfully “described the dire warnings he gave to officials that went unheeded” and the lives it cost. But Escobar didn't do anything, then or now, to mobilize working-class action to redress the problem. This failure—for which the firefighters and thousands of workers have already paid dearly—is a result of his aligning the union with the Democratic Party. Initially he alibied Bass and her budget-slashing. No wonder the firefighters lack for manpower and equipment. Such links between the unions and the Democrats must be broken to defend the working class and save the city.

To make up for the shortage of firefighters, the city rulers have pressed large numbers of incarcerated black and Latino youth into service. Dating back over a century, this practice of enlisting prison slave-labor has permitted the L.A. bosses to thin the ranks of the firefighters and keep their compensation down. These inmates, who are nearly one-third of the crew, make less than \$1 an hour and work 12 to 24 hour shifts. The union tops have joined forces with liberals to try to ban the practice. But such a solution would simply pack off the inmates back to prison and leave the union short-handed.

Instead, the union should fight to organize the prisoners and win them full wages and benefits. Many of the prisoners who risk their lives fighting fires can't even be firefighters upon release due to felony records—something the union should fight to overturn. Fighting to incorporate the prisoners into their ranks would go a long way toward improving conditions for the professional firefighters too and bridge the divide between the workers and the incarcerated who are seen as taking their jobs.

The other city unions could also provide vital services during the crisis and in its aftermath. Amid all-sided panic and disorganization, L.A. transit workers, together with other unionized workers, could have taken charge of planned and coordinated evacuations, marshaling buses to the disaster sites to carry people to safety. Going forward, they could transport clean-up and work crews around the city. But once again, to implement such a basic measure would require exposing the transit union misleaders who are in bed with the Democrats like Bass.

To pull Los Angeles up from disaster, the workers movement must fight for the following, in opposition to the liberals and the right, the Democrats and the Republicans:

- *Transit workers, especially bus drivers, should run evacuation efforts!*
- *Bring inmates fighting fires into the union at full union wages and benefits!*
- *Make vacant housing and buildings available to the newly homeless as well as the legions of existing homeless in L.A.! Construct quality, integrated housing for all!*
- *Create massive public works programs run by the unions to repair and expand basic infrastructure—not just in the wealthy areas, but throughout all of L.A.!*
- *Expropriate the utility companies under workers control!*
- *Expropriate the Palisades and Malibu and use the land for the benefit of all working people!*

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